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PP RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM  
DE RUEHML #1886/01 1220918  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 020918Z MAY 06  
FM AMEMBASSY MANILA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0799  
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC  
RHHMUNA/CDRUSPACOM HONOLULU HI  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 001886

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EAP, EAP/MTS, DS

E.O. 12958:N/A  
TAGS: PINS ASEC RP  
SUBJECT: PEACEFUL MAY DAY RALLIES

REF: A. OPS CENTER - MANILA 05/01/2006 TELCON

1B. MANILA 1812  
1C. MANILA 1342

11. (SBU) Summary: Rallies in Manila and elsewhere in the Philippines were moderate in size and largely peaceful on the national labor day holiday of May 1. The largest rallies, which leftist groups organized, took place in Manila, but mainstream opposition parties also put on at least one other rally. Security forces were very careful not to provoke rally goers, and there were no reports of violence, apart from some pushing and shoving. In the lead up to May Day, government and Opposition elements had warned that there could be serious disturbances and perhaps even a coup attempt, none of which panned out. End Summary.

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12. (U) On the national Labor Day holiday of May 1, street protests by leftist groups and other Opposition elements ended peacefully, with no serious violence. Members of militant labor organizations held rallies in four designated "freedom parks" in the Metro Manila area to demand an increase in the minimum wage, to renew their calls for the ouster of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, and to voice their opposition to proposals to change the Philippine Constitution. Police estimated the number of demonstrators city-wide at approximately 10,000. Key rally organizers included the leftist political organizations BAYAN, Kilusang Mambabukid ng Pilipinas (Peasant Movement of the Philippines), Partidong Mangagawa (Workers' Party), as well as the left-wing unions, Kilusang Mayo Uno (May First Movement), and the Alliance of Progressive Labor. Simultaneous protest rallies, held in other major cities throughout the country, also ended peacefully, despite isolated reports of minor scuffles.

13. (U) In addition to the leftist-sponsored rallies, approximately 1,000 supporters of former president Joseph Estrada and former presidential candidate (now deceased) Fernando Poe Jr. staged a march in Manila to commemorate the fifth anniversary of EDSA 3, the failed violent uprising which sought to topple the newly installed Arroyo government in 2001. They demanded the release of Estrada, who is presently under house arrest while on trial for corruption charges (ref C).

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GRP Treads Carefully  
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¶4. (U) Amid rumors of renewed destabilization threats, the police and the military went on full alert and set up checkpoints along highways into Manila, as is standard procedure on May 1. Police secured approaches to Malacanang Palace, as well as to the EDSA Shrine -- a traditional venue of anti-government protest. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) activated 4,000 standby troops at Camp Aguinaldo in Manila but did not deploy them into the streets, in an effort to maintain a low profile and avoid provoking violent confrontations with protesters. In accordance with Malacanang's orders (and an April 25 Supreme Court ruling - ref b), police exercised "maximum tolerance" in dealing with demonstrators. At one point in the late afternoon of May 1, labor demonstrators attempted to march on the Mendiola Bridge near Malacanang but were blocked by the police about a kilometer away from their destination. After negotiations between police and rally organizers, the demonstrators agreed to disperse peacefully.

¶5. (U) Manila Mayor Jose Atienza announced on April 29 that the city had designated five "freedom parks" -- public areas where protesters may hold rallies without a permit -- in compliance with the latest Supreme Court decision. Several but not all of the May 1 demonstrations took place in these newly-designated "freedom parks." Several cities in Metro Manila also issued permits for rallies, while several small protests reportedly took place peacefully even in the absence of a permit, contrary to long-standing law also affirmed in the Supreme Court decision.

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Comment  
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MANILA 00001886 002 OF 002

¶6. (SBU) In the lead up to May Day, government and opposition elements had warned that there could be serious disturbances and perhaps even a coup attempt, none of which panned out. In light of that good news, many observers are breathing a sigh of relief. Others noted that the opposition is seriously short of the cash to stage large-scale protests, given the need -- at a minimum -- to transport and feed participants. Any spell of relief from the Philippines' endemic political turbulence will be short, however, with the Senate planning to resume hearings into alleged cheating during the 2004 presidential elections by President Arroyo and her associates when it comes back from break in mid-May, as well as another expected effort at impeachment of the President in the lower house in July.

KENNEY